

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE  
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**Operation JUST CAUSE: Foreshadowing Example of Joint Vision  
2010 Concepts in Practice**

by


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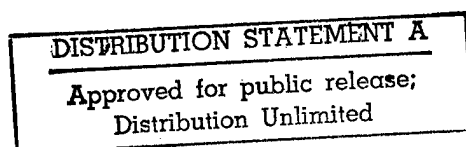
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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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## Abstract

Operation JUST CAUSE was an overwhelming victory. Strategic, operational, and tactical commanders effectively applied many operational concepts, most notably maneuver, firepower, protection and logistics highlighted in this paper. Were these leaders so prophetic or visionary as to plan and execute a major operation in 1989 using the Joint Vision (JV) 2010 conceptual template not yet written? No, JV 2010 simply adds a high-tech flavor to a battle-proven recipe of operational planning tenets.

The purpose of this paper is to display Operation JUST CAUSE as a realistic model for study and application of JV 2010 operational concepts and how the armed forces will fight in the 21st century. By no means does this paper contend that JUST CAUSE was a flawless operation. There were mistakes. Indeed, many argue that it was an anomaly because the military enjoyed the advantage of having forces and assets already in place even as part of Panama's very infrastructure. While this is true, JUST CAUSE clearly provides us a unique window in which to view a likely, contemporary scenario for deliberate joint planning and execution of contingency operations in less developed nations. Although occurring seven years prior to its writing, JUST CAUSE provides operational planners foreshadowing examples, both positive and negative, of the operational concepts: **dominant maneuver, precision engagement, full dimensional protection, and focused logistics** touted in Joint Vision (JV) 2010.

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## **Introduction**

Military theorists and strategists will argue for years whether or not certain operations or conflicts provide us with a paradigm of operational art or merely an aberration not worthy of operational study or analysis of lessons learned. This argument makes little sense because every conflict possesses peculiarities. It is not likely that we will ever experience another bloody war of attrition between the states. Nor, is it probable that America will ever ally with Russia to defeat an imperial alliance between a European and Asian country in a conflict that ends with a nuclear strike again either. The peculiarities of the American Civil War and World War II hardly disqualify them from the list of conflicts that theorists and strategists use to analyze and learn from. Operations DESERT SHIELD and STORM are no different and we learned much from this conflict over the last six years despite its many unique attributes. We have determined that its success resulted from: clear and concise national policy, sound joint doctrine, years of effective training management, first class equipment, and tough, patriotic military personnel dedicated to mission accomplishment. Nevertheless, it may be the last major conventional conflict for massive air, naval, and armor or mechanized ground forces (designed for the Fulda Gap clash of bipolar superpowers) for quite some time. Therefore, study of those lessons learned, in many ways, may lack relevance to our current military situation and structure.

The purpose of this paper is to display Operation JUST CAUSE as a realistic model for study and application of Joint Vision (JV) 2010 operational concepts and how U.S. armed forces will fight in the 21st century. By no means does this paper contend

that JUST CAUSE was a flawless operation. There were mistakes. Indeed, many argue that it, too, was an anomaly because U.S. forces enjoyed the advantage of having forces and assets already in place even as part of Panama's very infrastructure. While this is true, JUST CAUSE clearly provides us a unique window in which to view a likely, contemporary scenario for deliberate joint planning and execution of contingency operations in less developed nations. Although occurring seven years prior to this writing, JUST CAUSE provides operational planners foreshadowing examples, both positive and negative, of the operational concepts: **dominant maneuver**, **precision engagement**, **full dimensional protection**, and **focused logistics** touted in JV 2010.

This should come as no surprise that this successful operation mirrored concepts not yet conceived. On the contrary, the operational masterminds simply applied the primary elements that form the dynamics of combat power defined in the Army's FM 100-5, Operations. Coincidentally, three of the four elements of combat power: maneuver (*dominant maneuver*), firepower (*precision engagement*), and protection (*full-dimensional protection*) predate, but are nearly identical to the JV 2010 operational concepts in italics.<sup>1</sup>

## Background

In order to fully appreciate and analyze Operation JUST CAUSE, one must understand numerous crucial events, spanning several years, which preceded U.S. military combat action in the Republic of Panama in December 1989.

In June 1987, the U.S. government, which had a "quasi-colonial relationship with Panama dating from its independence in 1903," initiated a policy of "unreserved

opposition to General Manuel Antonio Noriega", a militant Panamanian officer who rose to power using intimidation and brutality.<sup>2</sup> This was due to confirmed and rumored incidents of: murdering political rivals, drug smuggling, money laundering, and election fraud.<sup>3</sup>

In February 1988, two U.S. federal grand juries indicted Noriega on drug trafficking charges and both American and Panamanian citizens wanted him out of office. Under this pressure, Panamanian President Eric Arturo Delvalle attempted to relieve Noriega, but this back-fired and Delvalle was ousted instead. With Noriega still in power, President Reagan imposed selected economic sanctions against Panama.<sup>4</sup>

In March 1988, spurred by the pressure of the sanctions, the Panama Defense Forces (PDF) attempted a coup, but Noriega quickly regained control and brutally purged the disloyal from the PDF. Noriega, now backed by a purely loyal PDF, ruthlessly quelled the subsequent riotous demonstrations and general strike of his opponents.

Increasing instability in the country pressed Reagan to tighten the economic sanctions and he sent an additional 1,300 military personnel to shore up security. Reagan offered to drop the drug trafficking indictments in return for Noriega's resignation, but Noriega ignored the President.<sup>5</sup> This prompted the National Command Authorities (NCA) to direct Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) to initiate planning for possible military intervention. The product was an OPLAN, code named BLUE SPOON, which detailed a gradual increase of military forces in Panama as a show of force that would influence the PDF to overthrow Noriega. SOUTHCOM shelved the plan until May 1989.<sup>6</sup>

The new U.S. President Bush inherited the problem, maintained the sanctions, and hoped that the May 1989 elections in Panama would remedy the Noriega situation. Concerned that Noriega would tamper with the election results, he sent former President Jimmy Carter to monitor and report election procedures. Carter confirmed that Noriega lost the election but his military defrauded the opposition and declared the voting invalid. Opposition demonstrations turned bloody when Noriega released Dignity Battalions, which were poorly equipped, undisciplined, armed criminals organized like militia, and loyal police to subdue the riot.<sup>7</sup>

In response to this and almost 2,000 recorded treaty violations and incidents suggesting the PDF's deliberate harassment of U.S. officials, citizens, military, and dependents, Bush recalled the ambassador.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the President reduced the embassy staff, recalled military dependents to the security of base housing, appealed to the Organization of American States (OAS) to insist on Noriega's resignation, and ordered an additional 2,000 combat troops to Panama. Sanctions were not working and the Departments of State and Defense started to agree that a military intervention might be the best course of action.<sup>9</sup>

On 1 October 1989, General Thurman became the Commander in Chief (CinC) SOUTHCOM and immediately worked with 18th Airborne Corps planners to refurbish BLUE SPOON. The modifications replaced gradual troop buildup with a scheme to place massive U.S. force in Panama overnight. The PDF threat was not great, but totaled 19,600 troops (6,000 active). PDF order of battle included two infantry battalions, 10 separate infantry companies, a cavalry squadron, with armored cars and 60mm mortars,



38 fixed-wing aircraft, 17 helicopters, numerous air defense guns, rumors of SA-7s, a few patrol boats, and the Dignity Battalions.<sup>10</sup> This poorly trained and equipped force, nevertheless, was capable of executing its most dangerous courses of action--taking hostages and fighting as guerrillas in the jungle. Military intervention, American style, means a lot of hardware, so planners secretly prepositioned M551 Sheridan tanks and AH-64 attack helicopters at Howard Air Force Base, just in case.

Two days after General Thurman assumed command of SOUTHCOM, another coup attempt failed and the American congress chastised U.S. military planners for not doing more to help it succeed. Military planners had monitored it, however, and the PDF response solidified the intelligence picture and clarified some targeting issues in BLUE SPOON. The U.S. military was now ready.

Three significant events in the final days prior to JUST CAUSE ignited the action. On 15 December 1989, the Panamanian National Assembly declared Noriega "maximum leader of national liberation, chief of government, and declared a state of war existed between the U.S. and the Republic of Panama." On 17 December, a U.S. Marine officer was shot and killed at a PDF roadblock and a Naval officer and his wife, who witnessed the incident, were roughed up.<sup>11</sup> President Bush had had enough. On 18 December he ordered the execution of BLUE SPOON (by then renamed JUST CAUSE) for 0100 hours, 20 December 1989. The White House Press Secretary's statement made it perfectly clear, why.

*"The President has directed U.S. forces to execute at 1 a.m. this morning pre-planned missions in Panama to protect American lives, restore the democratic process, preserve the integrity of the Panama Canal treaties and apprehend Manuel Noriega."*<sup>12</sup>

## Dominant Maneuver

*"...will be the multidimensional application of information, engagement, and mobility capabilities to position and employ widely dispersed joint air, land, sea, and space forces to accomplish the assigned operational tasks. Dominant maneuver will allow our forces to gain decisive advantage by controlling the breadth, depth, and height of the battlespace."*<sup>13</sup>

The White House had given clear guidance. With these objectives in mind, strategic and operational commanders pulled this large undertaking together. In terms of operational art, commanders must design, organize, and conduct campaigns and major operations that attain strategic goals.<sup>14</sup> JUST CAUSE qualifies best as a major operation.

One of the initial challenges regarding analysis of JUST CAUSE is in defining the levels of war in which it occurred. Clearly, the NCA and CinC SOUTHCOM, General Max Thurman, resided in the strategic realm. The Joint Task Force (JTF) commander, LTG Carl Stiner, served at the operational level. Finally, numerous, subordinate element and task force commanders fought at the tactical level. But, as Professor David F. Chandler (Rear Admiral, retired) then serving as the Chief of Staff for CinC South said:

*"The CinC, the JTF commander, and the tactical combat element commanders existed in the same country, same city, and in many cases, only a few miles apart. This close proximity made it difficult to clearly delineate the levels of war and the strategic and operational often transcended the tactical level of war boundary."*<sup>15</sup>

SOUTHCOM planners understood the political and military objectives and correctly identified the enemy's strategic and operational centers of gravity. The strategic center of gravity was Noriega. "As long as the PDF leader remained in power, he could still serve as a rallying point for the Panamanian military and the Dignity Battalions."<sup>16</sup> His capture was a stated military objective and a key to success. The PDF gave Noriega his strength. Consequently, the enemy armed forces were the operational center of gravity.

In order to strike at these centers of gravity, strategic airlift enabled operational commanders to position and employ widely dispersed air and land forces. By deploying sufficient troops in a dominant maneuver to add 14,000 troops to the 12,000 already stationed in Panama, U.S. forces moved into a position of "decisive advantage" over the enemy. Figure 1 shows how 63 C-141s, 19 C-130s, and 2 C-5s airlifted troops from Fort Bragg, NC, Fort Lewis, WA, Fort Benning, GA, Fort Ord, CA, and Fort Polk, LA in 24 hours.<sup>17</sup>

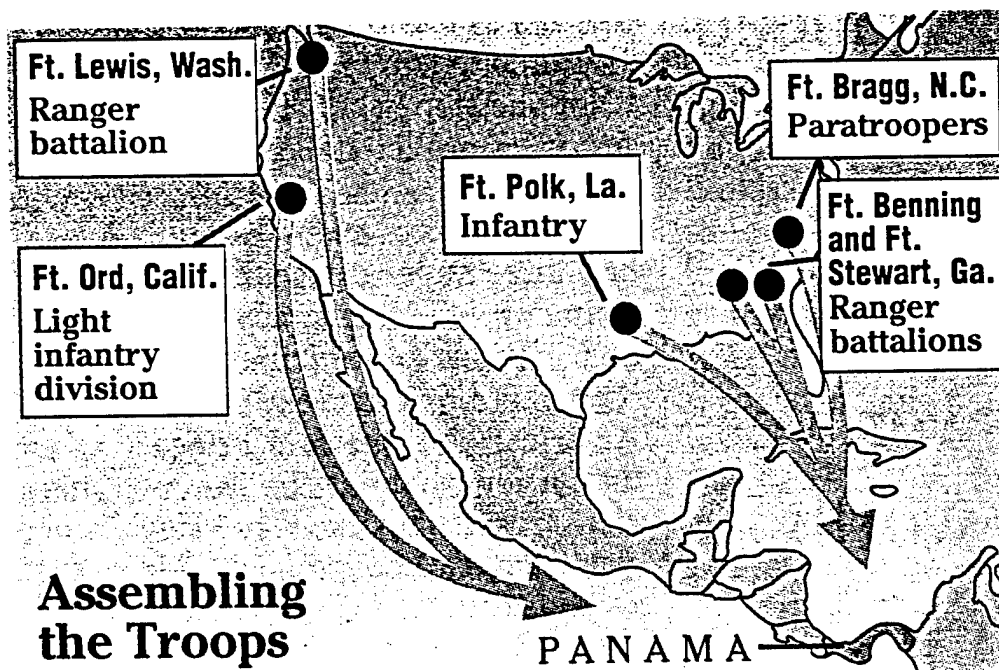


Figure 1<sup>18</sup>

This massive airlift from multiple locations in CONUS was a major strategic feat. Interestingly, many flights assumed operational, even tactical significance with the additional complex requirement to arrive at an exact location at precisely H-Hour -- 0100 hours, 20 December 1989.

Newsweek magazine accurately described this masterful stroke as a classic *coup de main*<sup>19</sup>--“an offensive operation that capitalizes on surprise and simultaneous execution of supporting operations in one stroke.”<sup>20</sup> Figure 2 displays the H-hour strikes; “27 targets were struck simultaneously by a combined force of U.S. Army Rangers, paratroops, light infantry, Navy SEALs (sea-air-land teams), and marines supported by helicopter gun ships, attack aircraft, and light armored vehicles.”<sup>21</sup> After some savage but brief fighting, enemy command and control was neutralized and the PDF lost cohesion. While some units persisted for a few days, organized PDF resistance was destroyed within the first 24 hours.

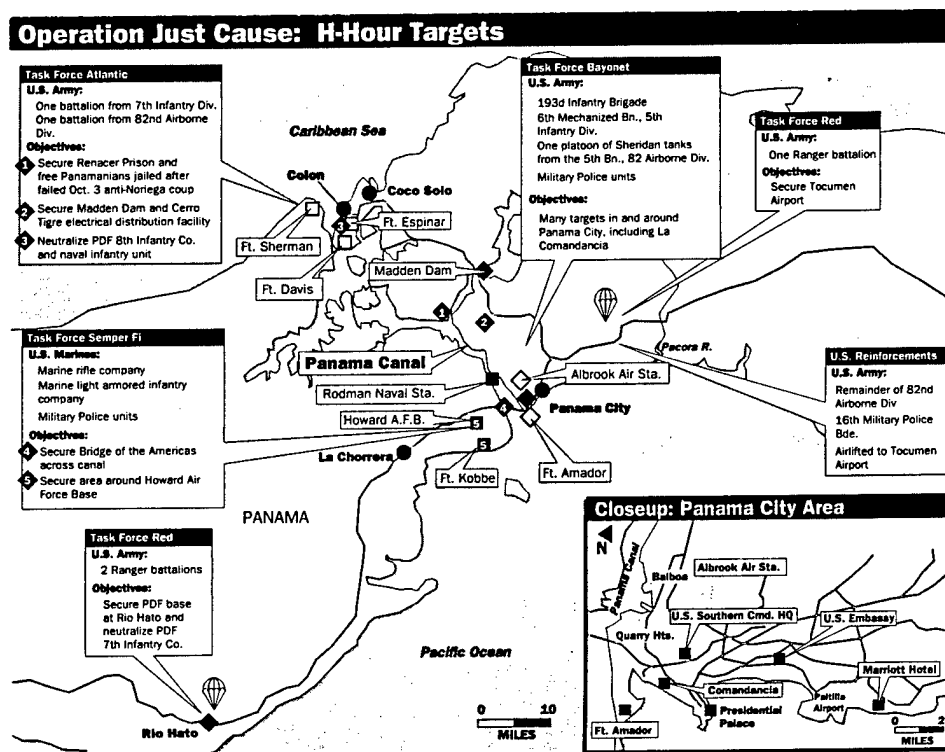


Figure 2<sup>22</sup>

Detailed discussion of individual Task Force actions delves too deeply into the tactical arena. However, analysis of figure 2 clearly displays the significance of

simultaneous strikes to achieve dominant maneuver and put friendly forces in a position of advantage over the enemy operational center of gravity--the PDF.

## Precision Engagement

*"...will consist of a system of systems that enables our forces to locate the objective or target, provide responsive command and control, generate the desired effect, assess our level of success, and retain the flexibility to reengage with precision when required. Even from extended ranges, precision engagement will allow us to shape the battlespace, enhancing the protection of our forces."*<sup>23</sup>

JUST CAUSE highlights premier examples of precision engagement. The U.S. capitalized on its advantages in delivery accuracy and stealth technology to surgically strike, while minimizing collateral damage and civilian casualties, in providing operational fires. Historically, JUST CAUSE marked the first shots fired in anger for two new fire support platforms, the Air Force's F-117 "Stealth" fighter and the Army's AH-64 "Apache" helicopter.<sup>24</sup> Additionally, the already-battle proven AC-130 "Spectre" gun ship proved invaluable as a premier fire support platform capable of pin-point precision in environments where the enemy air defense capability is negligible. Finally, the judicious use of highly trained, specially selected Special Operations Forces (SOF) for surgical ground strike operations all contributed to the precise engagement that allowed operational planners to shape the battlespace.

At first look, these weapon systems merely provided tactical fire support. From an operational standpoint, however, these aerial fire support platforms used emerging technology to locate, strike from extended ranges, ascertain battle damage, and reengage, when necessary, targets of operational significance.

The F-117 was chosen for its ability to bomb accurately at night. Rio Hato, Panama provided a perfect target for the Stealth's maiden run. It was a purely military complex, and with elite PDF units stationed there, suggested a savage fight. Also, it was slightly removed from a modest civilian populace. Tactical planners requested two 2,000 pound bombs dropped in support of the airborne and subsequent ground assault. One bomb on the arms room; the other on the main barracks, with the rationale that a weapon system is a person and his weapon. The destruction of either achieves the desired effect. The operational commander (LTG Stiner), however, altered the fire support to achieve a different effect.

*"...It would have been very easy just to go in there and blow those barracks off the map and kill everybody, but I didn't want that. Our philosophy from the beginning was to minimize casualties, death, destruction and damage because this was a very unusual mission." <sup>25</sup>*

As a participant at the tactical level, I personally did (do) not agree with that decision and, to this day, believe that a more precise strike of the barracks at Rio Hato would have generated little political repercussion and reduced friendly casualties. Nevertheless, a 2,000 pound bomb dropped 50 yards away from the main barracks in order to "stun" the PDF while 700 U.S. Army Rangers parachuted onto the nearby airfield. The second bomb impacted insignificantly on the beach over 300 yards from its intended target.

Extensive investigations followed as to why a bomb from this expensive platform missed its target. More serious inquiry pursued why the Air Force failed to report the incident. The investigations revealed some technical problems and poor command,

control, and communications exacerbated by the highly classified and compartmented secrecy that shrouded the "Stealth" project in 1989.

The F-117 delivered 50% of its operational fires to the moderate satisfaction of the ground tactical commander but showed there was room for vast improvement in our ability with this system. Fortunately, lessons learned from this initial combat action in Panama improved our proficiency resulting in unbelievable success in the Gulf two years later.

The AH-64 "Apache" fared better in her baptism of fire. It too was chosen for its survivability and pinpoint accuracy, especially at night. Its ability, to launch high explosive "Hellfire" missiles into hardened targets, provided commanders with the ability to suppress enemy air defense during air ingress. Additionally, it could engage enemy armor in close proximity to buildings and people while minimizing collateral damage. On the other hand, the Apache revealed deficiencies in use as a close air support platform due to the inability of thermal sites to distinguish enemy body heat from friendly.<sup>26</sup>

For the AC-130 "Spectre" gun ship, JUST CAUSE was just another entry in its growing record of successes. Operational planners selected it for its proven ability to deliver pinpoint 105mm and 40mm fires in close support of troops while minimizing collateral damage to structures and innocent civilians. Numerous accounts attest to its knocking out enemy vehicles and dismounted formations without injuring friendly troops or damaging civilian homes only 50 meters away.

Professor Chandler expressed profound admiration for the “surgical skill” with which ground forces supported by AC-130 gun ships demolished the National Department of Investigations (DENI) headquarters in Balboa:

*“...none of the many buildings in very close proximity to the DENI, not even the Christmas creche displayed in front of the headquarters, were in any way damaged by this precision engagement.”<sup>27</sup>*

Finally, the use of well equipped, highly trained SOF units, trained to conduct close quarter battle, in urban terrain, at night provided operational planners with a very surgical force engagement capability that aerial platforms could not provide. Their ability to infiltrate and selectively engage enemy soldiers without injuring hostages or innocent bystanders provides the most quintessential model of precision engagement.

In summary, high-tech aerial weapon platforms (F-117, AH-64, AC-130) and SOF provided operational planners with the ability to precisely engage targets of operational and tactical significance while minimizing collateral damage and effectively protecting our own forces.

### **Full-Dimensional Protection**

*“...will be the control of the battlespace to ensure our forces can maintain freedom of action during deployment, maneuver and engagement, while providing multi-layered defenses for our forces and facilities at all levels. Full -dimensional protection will enable the effective employment of our forces while degrading opportunities for the enemy.”<sup>28</sup>*

In almost all cases, the precision engagement of enemy targets by high-tech weapons, described in the previous section, inherently provided protection to friendly forces. Despite one unfortunate exception (due to the inability of the SEALs to communicate with an AC-130 gun ship for fire support at Paitilla Airport resulting in four friendly KIA and eight WIA), operational planners of JUST CAUSE achieved full-



dimensional protection. Controlling the area of operations allowed freedom of action during deployment, maneuver, and engagement. Full-dimensional protection directs protection of facilities and implies protection of the local populace and infrastructure. American forces enjoyed the operational advantage of having prepositioned forces and assets. This advantage, however, had another side--30,000 U.S. citizens, that must be protected, located "down range" as potential targets in a combat zone. JUST CAUSE provided some challenges to the operational concept of protection.

When asked what he or LTG Stiner might have planned differently in the whole operation, Professor Chandler said:

*"I believe we would have given more thought to future operations and more quickly redeploying units, sent to engage the PDF, back into Panama City to protect civilians from looting and chaos."*<sup>29</sup>

This criticism is founded. Operational planners were guilty of not thinking past the first few moves. The problem, however, comes from the paradox of destroying the enemy force that is also the security for civil infrastructure.

The lessons learned may be to plan for the pause between military success and subsequent anarchy. Front-load the military police and civil-military effort on the heels of assault troops to positively exploit success and quickly replace infrastructure. Earlier, the historical background of this paper explained that because of poor diplomatic relations with Panama, the President recalled the ambassador and reduced the embassy staff. Additionally, there was no political advisor on the JTF staff. These inadequacies resulted in a poor interagency effort to quickly embrace local civilian leadership and rebuild Panama.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, some aspects of full-dimensional protection occurred even before planners went to work. Though mostly tactical in nature, certain training practices throughout the mid to late 1980s contributed significantly to the protection of forces. Realistic, live-fire, Military Operations in Urban Terrain (MOUT) training, at night, prepared assault troops to quickly overwhelm enemy forces. Also, realistic medical treatment and evacuation of combat casualties, strenuously trained and evaluated at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), saved many servicemen that would have otherwise died of wounds.

### Focused Logistics

*"...the fusion of information, logistics, and transportation technologies to provide rapid crisis response, to track and shift assets even while enroute, and to deliver tailored logistics packages and sustainment directly at the strategic, operational, and tactical level of operations."*<sup>31</sup>

The previously discussed operational concepts, effectively employed in JUST CAUSE, were closely interrelated. **Precision engagement** suppressed enemy forces, while **protecting** friendly forces, and allowing successful **maneuver**. This section will address how focused logistics rendered the other concepts possible. Any successful operation has sound logistics support at its roots and JUST CAUSE was no different.

It is assumed that the special operators, paratroops, and light infantrymen were supported so well because many forces and assets were already in place. While this is true, this assumption unjustly ignores the truly Herculean effort of what used to be referred to as Military Airlift Command (MAC), now the Air Mobility Command (AMC). MAC capitalized on transportation technologies to provide rapid crisis response. Including the precise airborne assault transport missions flown to support H-Hour, MAC

flew 408 flights (55 C-130, 254 C-141, and 99 C-5) to move 19,500 personnel and 11,700 tons of material in support of JUST CAUSE. Airlift delivered, food (enough to feed 50,000 for 30 days), medical supplies, and temporary housing for Panamanians left homeless due to the fighting.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, MAC provided transportation to secretly preposition tanks and armored personnel carriers deemed necessary by the JTF commander. While this is tactical in nature, given the intolerance for casualties and finicky nature of American civil resolve, logistical support to enhance troop protection assumed strategic significance.

Logistical support in JUST CAUSE significantly contributed to its success, however, operational planners enjoyed certain advantages from pre-positioned forces and materials. We must be careful not to learn the wrong logistical lessons from this conflict. Other conflicts have and will provide challenges that tax the system to a greater extent. Nevertheless, JUST CAUSE clearly demonstrated the high state of readiness of U.S. support and air transport capabilities to provide focused logistics to the operation.<sup>33</sup>

## Conclusion

Operation JUST CAUSE was an overwhelming victory. "It was clearly a success, even a masterpiece, of *operational art*.." <sup>34</sup> Strategic, operational, and tactical commanders effectively applied many operational concepts, most notably maneuver, firepower, protection and logistics highlighted in this paper. Were these leaders so prophetic or visionary as to plan and execute a major operation using a conceptual template not yet written for another seven years? No, JV 2010 simply adds a high-tech flavor to a battle-proven recipe of operational planning tenets.

Despite this success, there were flaws. However, the modern spin that JV 2010 puts on established operational concepts may reveal answers or solutions to correct some problems that slightly tainted the triumph. The U.S. sustained casualties from friendly fire and that is always unacceptable. Full-dimensional protection may dictate highly innovative methods to discern friend from foe and shield ourselves from our own extremely lethal weapons. Despite huge improvements from URGENT FURY in Grenada, U.S. forces still experienced some communications interoperability issues. Hopefully, standardized, joint methodology and training with the ultra-modern C4I equipment, alluded to in JV 2010, will make us better information warriors. Failure to plan for lack of civil and governmental instability, created by our overnight combat success, may be remedied with improved, experienced interagency action and focused logistics for a war-stricken civil populace in addition to sustaining friendly forces.

Our stewardship is to learn the appropriate lessons from this conflict as they apply to future endeavors. The U.S. military held a good hand in this one and had little excuse had it failed. Pre-positioned forces, technologically superior weapons, better trained and equipped troops, and established friendly installations virtually foreordained victory. Effective application of JV 2010 concepts and other operational tenets in future conflicts will be necessary or the outcome may not be so one-sided.

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